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AUTHOR Reagan, Sally Barr
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ABSTRACT

A study of students in a linked reading/writing course team-taught by a reading instructor and a writing instructor was conducted to describe the effects of reading instruction upon the composing processes of freshman basic writers. Data were collected from direct observation, interviews, writing samples, and audio- and video-tapes of composing. Data were analyzed for the entire class, for an intermediate group of low, medium, and high ability students, and for two students as case studies. The findings indicated that as a result of one semester of combined reading/writing instruction, (1) students' reading scores improved slightly but not significantly, (2) subjects' writing proficiency improved significantly, and (3) students improved their composing process, their conception of the composing process, and their perceptions of themselves as writers. However, the study also demonstrated that instruction alone is not sufficient to effect change. Numerous other factors, such as course content and structure, motivation, attitude toward oneself and toward literacy, family and educational background and the instructor's role and attitude toward the students and the subject, are also highly influential. (HTH)

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THE EFFECT OF COMBINED READING-WRITING INSTRUCTION ON THE COMPOSING PROCESSES OF BASIC WRITERS: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

Sally Barr Reagan

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THE EFFECT OF COMBINED READING-WRITING INSTRUCTION ON THE COMPOSING PROCESSES OF BASIC WRITERS: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

Research in reading, composition, psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology has demonstrated strong correlations between reading ability and writing proficiency and suggested that combined reading-writing instruction may be the most effective pedagogical means of improving students' writing. However, none of the research has described how combined reading-writing instruction affects writing proficiency.

This study was an attempt to fill that gap. To do so, I observed the students enrolled in a linked reading-writing course team-taught by a reading instructor and a writing instructor in order to describe the effects of reading instruction upon the composing processes of freshman basic writers. To gain a description of context as well as the composing process, data were collected from four different sources: direct observation, interviews, writing samples, and audio and video-tapes of composing.

Procedures - This research design was based upon Graves' (1981) three-part triangle: the bottom third represents the context of the reading-writing classroom, the middle third provides a more specific informational base of family and educational backgrounds; the top third presents an in-depth examination of the composing processes of two case study students. Taken altogether, this method of progressively intensive data collection, heretofore used only in research on the elementary level (see Graves, 1973,1976; and Calkins, 1982), allowed me to examine not only the written products and the composing process and how it changed, but also helped to explain these changes as reflections of attitudinal, pedagogical, contextual and environmental influences. By using all these data, a composite picture was formed which described in detail how these students' composing processes changed as a result of combined reading-writing instruction.

In order to provide a contextual base, the class was subdivided into groups for various levels of data collection and observation. The first level was comprised of the entire class. Data collected from this group were pre- and post-test reading and writing samples and information from initial and closing interviews. These data provided a broad base against which to compare the generalizations drawn from a closer examination of a smaller group of students. It also helped to select this group, comprised of a representative sample of six students (2 high, 2 medium and 2 low ability).

Data collected from this intermediate group consisted of all of the above, plus journal entries and interviews covering the students' past reading and writing experiences, educational background and reading and writing habits, plus their parents' educational background and attitudes toward reading and writing. This information was used in three ways: first, it helped verify generalizations drawn about the entire class; second, it was used to select two students to participate in case studies; and third, it served as a clearly stratified base against which to compare the findings drawn from the case studies.

The third level, then, focused upon the data collected from two students, Elsa and Javier, of medium and low writing abilities, respectively. Only two students were chosen due to the immense amount of time involved in compiling their data and synchronizing our schedules to obtain interviews, to video-tape each draft of three major writing assignments and to discuss the composing strategies used in the writing of each draft. In addition to all the other data collected, this group provided free writes, edit sheets, notecards, notes and drafts from all writing assignments in both the reading and writing courses; video-tapes of the composing protocols during the writing of the three major assignments; taped post-writing discussions of the strong and weak points of their

essays; and folder interviews in which each student evaluated the entire body of their written work for the semester. All in all, a considerable amount of data.

Protocol Analyses - The main purpose of this study was to design a methodology which would move away from examination of the written product and instead describe, as naturally as possible, the composing processes of students so as to more accurately demonstrate the cognitive processes involved during composing and how they change—between drafts and across the semester—as a result of experience and instruction in reading and writing. Such a description would preclude, as much as possible, any interference, such as composing aloud, which might disturb the composing process. Thus a methodology was devised which would only minimally interfere with or disrupt the students' concentration. This investigative method, based on the work of Bloom (1954), Matsuhashi (1979), and Rose (1982), is termed stimulated recall. Stimulated recall has been found to be more reliable than the student's memory alone, for it allows the student's just-completed essay to prod recall of composing processes. According to Bloom, who tested its validity and reliability, the procedure enables the subject to "relive an original situation with great vividness and accuracy . . . and can be carried on in such a way as to have only minimal effect on the nature of the original situation" (1954, 25).

Although both classes required almost daily writing assignments, in order to demonstrate the increased complexity and use of the reading, writing and cognitive skills demanded for each subsequent essay, it was decided to observe the processes involved in the composing of each draft of three major writing assignments—narrative, argumentative, and research papers—which occurred approximately 4-6 weeks apart. In individual sessions, for each draft, the students brought all notes, writing and reading materials necessary to complete the writing

assignment and composed, seated at a desk behind which a video-tape camera focused over their right shoulder onto their text. During the ninety minute session, the students were left alone to compose, interrupted only at thirty minute intervals to change the video-tape.

The sessions were set at a maximum of ninety minutes whether the student had completed the draft or not, for two reasons: 1) ninety minutes was ample time to ascertain the processes involved in beginning, organizing and developing a paper; additional time would have revealed more of the same; and 2) following the composing session, we reviewed the video-tapes of the entire ninety-minute draft. Thus each session consumed three hours; a longer period would have been more exhausting than informative. During the stimulated recall, the student was questioned as to the significance or purpose of observed breaks in the composing process to discover what role reading played in the process, i.e., if and when reading were used to gain momentum, to clarify intended meaning, or to revise surface level errors. Transcripts of these taped sessions provided a clear record of the students' composing processes and how they did or did not change by the end of the semester.

Findings - In order to assess and organize the data, it was hypothesized that as a result of one semester of combined reading-writing instruction, the students in X101-W131 would change: their level of reading comprehension, their level of writing proficiency, their composing processes, their conception of the composing process, and their perception of themselves as writers. The analysis of these findings followed Graves' three-part triangle, proceeding from the entire class to the intermediate group of six to the case study students in order to determine how reliable and representative the data were.

Hypothesis 1: As a result of one semester of combined reading-writing instruction, the students will change their level of reading comprehension.

T-tests revealed that while mean reading scores improved slightly, the change was not statistically significant. Out of eleven students who completed the testing, five improved by an average of eight points; six regressed an average of six points. This pattern was repeated in the intermediate group of six. From this, it might be concluded that the combined reading-writing instruction had little or no impact upon the students' reading comprehension. However, interviews with this group revealed that instruction per se was not the determining factor. The students who improved had perfect attendance, turned in assignments on time, and were highly motivated, for a number of reasons, to succeed. Those who regressed were, with one exception, the opposite, missing an average of 2-2½ weeks of class, turning in late assignments, and demonstrating little or no interest in the course or improving their reading.

This group included the case study students, Elsa and Javier. Javier epitomized those students who showed no improvement; Elsa, however, was the exception. Her drop in reading score was a surprise, for she fit the model of those who improved. And indeed, as a result of her increased reading experience, her composing process had greatly improved in terms of fluency and organization. Whereas at the beginning of the semester she had no idea how to organize or develop an essay, by the end, she was able to organize her writing from an overall global plan assimilated from frequent encounters with texts. However, this assimilation appears to have been an unconscious act, for her lack of improvement on the reading test appeared related to a lack of conscious engagement with the learning process. Elsa was a dutiful student: she attended class and completed assignments, but she did not see the relationship between the learning of reading strategies in X101 and their application to reading of all kinds. Although she did as she was

told, completing her assignments, she was only going through the motions; she did not consciously engage in the learning situation; thus, she could not, or did not, apply these strategies to her own reading. From Elsa I learned that instruction, attendance, fulfillment of assignments or even a general desire to improve are not wholly sufficient to insure that learning takes place. The student must be actively involved with the learning situation in order for growth to occur.

Hypothesis 2: As a result of one semester of combined reading-writing instruction, the students in X101-W131 will improve their writing proficiency.

T-tests revealed statistically significant improvement in the students' writing by the end of the semester. In the intermediate group, this pattern was also evident. The reasons for improvement or lack thereof in writing were the same as on the reading test: failure to attend class and to complete assignments, lack of interest or desire to improve. The case study students fit the model. Javier was a prime example of those who did not improve.

Javier did not want to attend college; instead, he wanted to emulate his favorite older brother and join the Marines. Beyond reading his collection of Superhero comic books, he had little use for writing or reading skills. Therefore, he felt no qualms about missing approximately 2-3 weeks of class, did not complete his assignments, and consequently evidenced no change in his composing process. From beginning to end, his was a linear process characterized by speed: he wrote as quickly as possible, discussed his writing as briefly as possible, and left as soon as possible.

Elsa was his opposite. Her four older siblings had all graduated from college with at least bachelor's degrees; she was expected to do likewise. Consequently, she was highly motivated to improve. Indeed, Elsa was a perfectionist.

Like Perl's Tony, her initial composing process was highly recursive, but while Tony read to revise, Elsa continually read to organize. Because she had little prior reading experience, she had difficulty forming global plans. However, due to her reading and writing experience in the linked course, by the end of the semester she had assimilated a knowledge of text structure. As a result, her composing processbecame much more fluent.

Hypotheses 3, 4, and 5: As a result of one semester of combined reading-writing instruction, students in X101-W131 will improve their composing process, their conception of the compsoing process, and their perception of themselves as writers.

Without exception, the students began thesemester following a linear composing model, proceeding from outlining to writing a single draft to revising; if they became blocked during this process, half indicated they read to gain momentum while the other half stated they thought or waited for inspiration. By the end of the semester, this process had expanded and become recursive, involving mapping or free-writing to get started, and reading, writing, and revising multiple drafts to develop and communicate meaning. However, while the students clearly had to read to decide how and where to revise, they indicated no change in their awareness or use of reading during the composing process. This is where the case study analyses again proved valuable.

As I just mentioned, at the beginning of the semester, Elsa's composing process was characterized by a heavy dependence upon the re-reading of each prior phrase during the writing of a first draft so as to determine what to write next; by the end of the semester, this process had changed to a more general reliance upon reading to confirm intended meaning. Yet she was not conscious of this change; indeed, she appeared totally unaware that she read at all as she composed. From this it might be inferred that the students' awareness of the role of reading during

composing was not necessarily indicative of actual changes which may have occurred during the semester. To ascertain these changes, it seems that the students would have to be made aware of the role of reading via pedagogical intervention, and even then, to get a true picture of change, their composing would have to be video-taped and discussed.

The students' changes in their composing processes and their conception of what writing entailed was reflected in their changing perception of themselves as writers. At the beginning of the semester, 60% declared they were not good writers, while the other 40% rated themselves from mediocre to fair. However, when asked to compare their writing at the beginning and end of the semester by rating it on a scale of 1-10, they evidenced a growing self confidence: all felt they had improved by at least three points, from an initial average of 3.6 to 7.6 at the end. Moreover, all indicated that they had become more fluent, more organized, and more confident about their ability to write papers for other courses. Interestingly, these feelings of increased confidence and writing proficiency were expressed not only by those students whose writing scores had improved, but by those who had, statistically, not changed at all. Javier made little or no discernible changes in his composing process, yet he felt that his writing had improved from a 2 to a 5½ or 6. He gave himself this higher score because he felt he was now more fluent and because, for the first time, he had done something he considered impossible: he had written a ten-page research paper. As a result, despite what his instructors may have thought or his test scores indicated, Javier believed his writing had improved. He felt good about his writing and better about himself. While these are not the sole ends of a reading-writing classroom, it appears that this type of instruction did facilitate their growth. Equally important, this type of research methodology revealed their presence.

Conclusion - Quantitative measures showed that combined reading-writing instruction did help improve these Basic Skills students' writing proficiency. But this study also demonstrated that instruction alone is not sufficient to effect change. Numerous other factors, such as course content and structure, motivation, attitude toward oneself and towards literacy, family and educational background, the instructor's role and attitude toward the student and the subject, are also highly influential. Particularly in composition research, quantitative evaluations cannot adequately explain the results of various methods of pedagogical intervention nor describe exactly how they affect the student. In order to better understand the composing process, composition research needs to go beyond examination of product and process to also study the individual student through multi-faceted interviews and observations.